

THE PEOPLE WHO HAD LOCKJAW

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During my ministry in Canada I enjoyed the privilege of working with a very fine minister who was also the chaplain at the local prison. He told me of a sad experience when he walked with a prisoner to the place of execution. The convicted criminal came from the far north of Canada where he had been an official guide. Unfortunately, he had come to work in one of the southern cities and had associated with people who led him into a life of crime. One night in a drunken rage, he murdered a man and ultimately was sentenced to death. My friend asked if he had ever heard about Jesus and was astonished to hear his reply. "Yes, I heard about Him once. A missionary visiting the north country asked if I knew Jesus. I thought for a while and then replied, 'No! There is nobody homesteading in these parts with that name.'"

After several visits the convicted man accepted Christ as his Savior, and the change in his outlook was amazing. It was impossible to question his sincerity, but the law was unrelenting. As the chaplain accompanied him to the scaffold, he read from Psalm 23, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." My friend was extremely sad when he described how the prisoner said, "If only I had heard about Him earlier." Christians know the Savior and should testify concerning His power to save. Their failure to do so might lead to tragedy.

Naaman... The Diplomatic Captain (2 Kings 5:18)

The Syrian captain was probably a man with a commanding personality. Admired by his king and respected by his soldiers, he had gained considerable notoriety. His triumphs in battle had won an immortal place in the history of his nation. It is depressing to read, "Now Naaman, captain of the host of the king of Syria, was a great man with his master, and honorable, because by him the LORD had given deliverance unto Syria he was also a mighty man in valor, but he was a leper" (2 Kings 5:1). It is not known when the illustrious warrior first became a leper, but the news of the tragedy spread quickly through the land, and every citizen was filled with intense pity for the man whose exploits had made him famous.

Naaman had been sent to the king of Israel and after varying interludes had reached the home of the prophet Elisha, by whom he

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was instructed to bathe seven times in the river Jordan. His intense disappointment and anger had been apparent when he said, "Are not Abana and Pharpar, rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? may I not wash in them, and be clean?" (2 Kings 5:12). His reluctance to obey the prophet's command was overcome by the intercession of his servants, and the miracle which followed is now known throughout the world.

The captain was humbled when he returned to the servant of God but was amazed when Elisha refused payment for his services. He had never known a Syrian priest to refuse remuneration for anything! The prophet was very accommodating when the soldier sought permission to take some of Israel's soil back to Syria. His intention to build an earthen altar seemed to indicate the immensity of the gratitude filling his soul. The determination to remain true to the God of his salvation appeared to be obvious when he said, "Thy servant will henceforth offer neither burnt offering nor sacrifice unto other gods, but unto the LORD" (2 Kings 5:17). Then the captain hesitated; he was not sure how his final request would be received. Trouble awaited him in his homeland. Fellow countrymen

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would organize a huge celebration for his return, and a time of national thanksgiving would be proclaimed throughout Syria. The temple of Rimmon would be filled to capacity by enthusiastic worshipers, and even the king would prostrate himself in humble gratitude before the idol. When Naaman frowned, the prophet surely asked the cause of his discomfort. The Syrian explained, saying, "In this thing the Lord pardon thy servant, that when my master goeth into the house of Rimmon to worship there, and he leaneth on my hand. . . when I bow down myself in the house of Rimmon, the Lord pardon thy servant in this thing" (2 Kings 5:18). Probably Elisha was disappointed when he replied, "Go in peace," for he knew Naaman was about to lose his greatest opportunity.

The famous temple was packed with eager worshipers. The priests were standing before the towering image of Rimmon, and everyone eagerly awaited the arrival of the king and his illustrious servant. When the bugles sounded, the ornate doors of the pagan sanctuary opened, and the audience smiled as they saw their ruler leaning on the arm of the man whose deliverance they had come to celebrate. The service of thanksgiving commenced, and the high priest reminded the people of the immense debt owed to the idol whose presence dominated the assembly. The king's face was radiant, but

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apprehension seemed to interfere with the happiness of the famous captain. He dreaded the moment when everyone would be expected to bow before the god who was being praised for something he had not accomplished. Perhaps even angels were hushed when in conformity with the usual procedure, Naaman bowed before the idol. He was publicly acknowledging his debt to a god he had professed to abandon. The poor man had contracted lockjaw! He could have been the greatest evangelist ever heard in Syria, but alas, he was silenced by fear. Was he afraid of losing favor with the royal household and scared he might lose his popularity? The answer to those questions may never be known, but it is undeniable that many thousands of pagans might have been introduced to the God of Israel.

Nicodemus. . . The Distinguished Counselor (John 7:50-53)

The Jewish Council Chamber was hushed; a distinguished leader was about to address the assembly. Every person present listened intently, for Nicodemus was a brilliant orator. He would know how to solve the problem which threatened the country. The recurring arguments concerning Jesus of Nazareth were frustrating and tiresome; the situation demanded immediate action. The Speaker of the House used his gavel and invited the eminent ruler to take the floor.

"Nicodemus saith unto them, (he that came to Jesus by night, being one of them,) Doth our law judge any man before it hear him, and know what he doeth? They answered and said unto him, Art thou also of Galilee? Search, and look: for out of Galilee ariseth no prophet. And every man went unto his own house." Crestfallen and ashamed, Nicodemus joined his colleagues as they went into the streets of Jerusalem. He had lost the opportunity of a lifetime and could never outlive his remorse. Even Jesus had recognized his stature within the nation, for He had identified him as the teacher of the nation (see John 3:10, The Amplified Bible). The ruler had earlier sought an interview with the Savior because he desired information as to whether or not Jesus was the expected Messiah (see the author's John's Wonderful Gospel, Kregel Publications, 1962, p. 78). The eminent theologian would have known that Daniel predicted the arrival of the Messiah, and had even described His death. Furthermore, the time mentioned had expired thirty years earlier, and since there was not another prophet to be compared with Jesus of

Nazareth, the knowledge and oratorical ability of the greatest teach-

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er in Israel could have made tremendous impressions within that assembly. That he was silenced by a rude statement in the chamber remains one of the greatest tragedies of the New Testament. The counselor might have covered himself with honor had he not suffered from an acute case of lockjaw.

Nicodemus probably thought he was the only believer in the assembly, but he was mistaken; there was another man, Joseph of Arimathea, who listened intently as Nicodemus made his brief statement. The speaker abruptly terminated his speech, and his colleague concluded he was the only disciple in the Sanhedrin.

When Nicodemus sat quietly in the Sanhedrin chamber, he remembered the occasion when he had been enthralled in the presence of Jesus. He probably believed that if Christ could be invited to address the House, other members would also admire the wonderful Man from Nazareth. It is impossible to know what tremendous effects might have followed if he had not been hushed by the aggressive attitude of his critics. It would have made exciting reading if John could have described how the great ruler of the Jews had transformed a parliamentary session into an evangelistic service. Unfortunately, his talent was left buried in the sands of silence, and although later he went with Joseph to lay the body of Jesus to rest, he could never erase from his memory the fact that when Christ needed a friend, he had remained silent.

Gamaliel... The Discreet Coward (Acts 5:34-40)

He was a polished advocate, an eminent and internationally famous scholar. Gamaliel was the president of the Hebrew theological seminary, and possibly the greatest intellectual authority within the nation. When he spoke, men listened. Outside the government building Jerusalem was in an uproar. The streets were crowded with excited people, and according to popular report, obstinate fishermen from Galilee were the cause of the trouble. The men had miraculously escaped from prison and were again disturbing the peace. The agitators had been apprehended and escorted to the Senate building. Their attitude and remarks were extremely uncompromising, and the angry rulers hardly knew how to handle the situation. Most of the counselors favored the death penalty for the upstart rebels, but a final decision had been made.

"Then stood there up one in the council, a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a doctor of the law, had in reputation among all the people,

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and commanded to put the apostles forth a little space." The extent of the man's influence may be measured by his ability to command. His words were authoritative, and the accused men were removed to an adjacent chamber. The speech then delivered by the eminent educator was expressed with dignity and eloquence hard to resist. After presenting his irrefutable argument, Gamaliel said, "Refrain from these men, and let them alone: for if this counsel or this work be of men, it will come to nought: But if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it; lest haply ye be found to fight against God." His speech was unanimously approved. "And when they had called the apostles, and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.

Dr. Gamaliel returned to his home, but it is doubtful that he slept that night. He had delivered a convincing speech and saved the lives of the accused men. Nevertheless he had not protested when the prisoners were flogged. According to his own deductions, future

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events would decide his course of action. The new movement called Christianity would either diminish or conquer the world. The theologian might be forced to make difficult decisions which might destroy his popularity throughout the nation.

The impossible had taken place, but it was difficult to believe that one of the graduates from the Hebrew college had become a Christian. Saul of Tarsus, who had been commissioned by the High Priest to destroy heretics, had undergone a startling experience. It was said he had met the risen Christ and embraced the alien faith. The people were filled with excitement and wondered what would happen next. Gamaliel had warned about the possibility of fighting against Jehovah and had assured his colleagues that if the new doctrines were contrary to the will of God, the movement would perish. Probably many people asked what the scholar would do if the condemned movement continued to increase. As time passed, Gamaliel heard more and more about the exploits of his former student. Roman soldiers were being won for Christ, and along the highways of Europe and Asia preachers were making known the gospel which Paul had earlier condemned.

Gamaliel had been a true prophet; his words had been fulfilled, and it was becoming evident that men could not fight against God and win. The theologian considered his future actions. If he followed Jesus of Nazareth, he would lose his position as Chancellor of the University, be deprived of his income, and many would

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consider him a traitor to the ancient faith. Perhaps he should wait a little longer. He did and eventually disappeared into obscurity. He might have been one of Paul's greatest helpers, but unfortunately he developed lockjaw and that problem ruined his future and possibly destroyed his soul.

The Prisoners in Babylon... The Despondent Captives (Psalm 137: 1-3)

There were many captives in Babylon, but not all were idolaters. During the long hot days the slaves were forced to make bricks and erect walls, and the merciless lashes of whips made their tasks intolerable. When the shadows of evening lengthened, the laborers were permitted to cool their feet in the river and lean against hovels to remember their homeland. Those Hebrews had learned life's most important lessons in a school of suffering. It had been a bitter experience. Even the twinkling stars seemed to mock them. One of the captives supplied a word-picture of those horrendous evenings. He wrote, "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion. We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof. For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song; and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion. How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land? If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy."

The Babylonians did not understand the captives were unable to sing when their hearts were broken. Mirth was never the child of sorrow. Those suffering people could not produce symphonies when the strings of their souls refused to vibrate. Praise never fills lives when memories are painful. People who once served the Lord and whose folly led them into bondage can only be filled with remorse. The poet was correct when he wrote:

The peaceful hours I once enjoyed;

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How sweet the memory still:
But they have left an aching void,
The world can never fill.

There is no night as dark as that in which the Light of the World never shines. It was written of Judas that "he went out and it was

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night." Did that unfortunate man reminisce before he placed the rope around his neck and remember the occasions when he walked with the Savior? Did he sigh when he remembered going through the highways and byways of Palestine proclaiming the glorious news of salvation? Poor man, he had much in common with the Babylonian captives; it was difficult to sing praises when his soul was filled with haunting accusations. He would never again sing the melodies of heaven, for he had lost his music in a sea of guilt. Unfortunately many people are still making the same mistake. They forget that people who play with fire eventually become burned.

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